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ABSTRACT

Letters of recommendation too often do not tell recipients what they need to know about a candidate. The letters may address irrelevant qualities of the candidate or they may discuss only vague generalities. Faced with this problem, many employers prefer telephone interviews; however, people in higher education continue to rely on letters of recommendation. Some suggestions for writing effective letters that have been offered by experienced letter readers are: (1) don't rely on a predetermined list of questions; (2) explain your relationship to the candidate; (3) learn about the candidate's career goals; (4) compare the candidate to others; (5) tailor the letter to the specific position or program being applied for; (6) back up your remarks with details; (7) decline the candidate's request for a letter if you feel uncomfortable about writing it; (8) elaborate on the limitations of the candidate's current position; (9) avoid sexist or racist remarks; (10) watch for phrasing which could be misunderstood; (11) volunteer to provide further information by telephone; (12) keep the letter brief; and (13) end on an upbeat note. (DC)

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Personal & Professional

What to Say in a Letter of Recommendation? Sometimes What You Don't Say Matters Most

By STACY E. PALMER

> *Dear Admissions Committee,*
> *About the application of Joe Jones: Save yourself a headache.*
> *Sincerely,*

That kind of letter, similar to one received by the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, can make it easy for an admissions panel to decide the fate of an applicant, says Norma E. Wagoner, the school's associate dean for student services and educational resources.

But, according to many educators and employers, too few letters of recommendation tell recipients what they really need to know about a candidate.

"Basically, I see a lot of nonspecific, affirmative adjectives strung together that aren't terribly helpful," says Joyce E. Cornell, dean of admissions at the Columbia Graduate School of Business, who estimates that she has read over 75,000 letters of recommendation in nine years there.

"People have a tendency to address qualifications that have very little to do with the job itself," says Gloria W. White, associate vice-chancellor for personnel and affirmative action at Washington University. "Telling me that a candidate believes in apple pie and motherhood doesn't tell me whether he or she can be a good administrator."

Many writers of recommendations worry that their letters won't be kept confidential, Ms. White adds, so they deliberately limit their comments to vague generalizations. They fear that anything more specific could be considered libelous.

Wanda F. Ross, assistant executive director of the College and University Personnel Association, says someone who provides a negative reference is unlikely to be sued directly. But if an employee takes legal action to protest a dismissal, letters of reference might be brought up—and then, she says, the letter writer who "sticks to the facts" and avoids evaluative statements is protected.

Using the Phone

Many employers, however, say a lack of detail in written recommendations has led them to depend on phone calls to get in-depth information about a candidate. That way, they say, not only do they get a more candid response, but they also may pick up clues from the speaker's tone of voice, a long pause, or an offhand remark.

Even so, people in higher education continue to use letters of recommendation as standard evaluation tools for both admissions and staff appointments.

Passage of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, often referred to as the "Buckley Amendment," triggered much concern about the use of recommendations because it guaranteed students access to the material in their college files. Admissions officers say most students waive their rights to obtain copies of recommendations. But ethical and legal issues involving written recommendations still have prompted some institutions to consider adopting guidelines for their preparation and use.

At the Harvard University Medical School, for instance, a faculty committee drafted guidelines for writing letters after it was learned that a recommendation written for a medical student there neglected to mention that he had been indicted for rape.

The committee's chairman, Paul S. Russell, professor of surgery, says faculty letter writers are expected to "follow the golden rule" in deciding how much to reveal about a candidate's background.

"Try to think what letter you would most like to get" about a candidate, he says. "But you have to be absolutely certain about any detrimental information you convey."

Dr. Russell adds that writers should provide evidence for negative statements and assess the reliability of the information's source.

While legal concerns should not be minimized, says Joyce P. Curll, dean of admissions at the New York University School of Law, many letter writers don't seem to

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Letters of Recommendation *Continued from Preceding Page*

realize that it probably helps applicants to say something about their weaknesses.

Many people say they are suspicious when a letter makes the candidate sound superhuman. Letters that don't seem to offer a balanced evaluation, therefore, are often ignored.

"There are different ways of putting negative comments," notes Ms. Wagoner.

"You could say, 'This person is insecure and I can't figure out his motivation'—that would kill a person right away," she says. "Or you could say, 'This person was insecure during his first year, which may account for some low grades, but he has blossomed since then and done well.' That can be a favorable comment."

But obvious attempts to "offer a negative statement by manufacturing a weakness" can backfire, says Ms. Cornell of Columbia. She says she is especially annoyed by such comments as, "His only weakness is that he has not yet studied business."

"Would that we were all so perfect," adds Ms. Cornell.

Writing an effective letter of recommendation is no easy task, however—even for those who have had extensive experience wading through stacks of them. But veterans of the task say they have picked up some techniques that have improved their own letter-writing skills. Among their suggestions:

"Start with a clean slate," says Elizabeth Day, director of admissions and student affairs at Dartmouth College's Amos Tuck School of Business Administration. Consider what stands out about the applicant and don't let any "laundry list" of questions stop you from pointing out what is most important, she says.

Explain your relationship to the candidate. Make clear how well you know the person, says John P. Hummel, associate head of the chemistry department and chairman of the graduate admissions committee at the University of Illinois. Have you worked closely with the individual? Or is your recommendation based on limited information, such as performance in one course?

Learn about the candidate's career goals before you write. Particularly for students you don't know outside the classroom, it's a good idea to set up an interview with them, says Janet Bickel, staff associate in the division of student programs at the Association of American Medical Colleges. Then ask them to describe an encounter with someone who holds different beliefs from theirs, or ask what they've accomplished during vacation periods, she suggests. That way you can assess a student's motivation and ability to think independently, she says.

Compare the applicant to others. It may not be enough to write that a person has done well, says Ms. Cornell. If it's appropriate, try saying something like, "This is one of the best students I've ever had in this class," or, "This is the best person to have held this job in five years." Also mention the nature and length of your own experience to add credibility, says Mr. Hummel.

Tailor the letter to specific positions or programs. "If I'm looking for a comptroller, I want to know that a person has successfully managed 'x' amount of money and saved 'x' dollars," says Ms. White.

At the N.Y.U. law school, Ms. Curll says, she appreciates knowing how prospective students would benefit from studying in New York City.

Use details to back up your remarks. Use "behavioral" terminology, says Anne S. Devlin, associate professor and chairman of the psychology department at Connecticut College. Give concrete examples, for instance, to show how a teacher conducted a particularly creative laboratory course—or mention a colleague's willingness to accept even the dreariest of committee assignments, she suggests.

Tell applicants honestly how you feel about writing a letter for them. You're under no obligation to write a letter for anyone, so if you feel uncomfortable doing it, say so, says Patricia L. Rose, director of career planning and placement services at the University of Pennsylvania. And if you end up writing a negative letter anyway, at least tell the candidate that you have done so.

Elaborate on the limitations of a position or situation. If a person hasn't had a chance to demonstrate ability in an area that may be essential in a new job, that should be mentioned, says Richard C. Skelton, director of admissions at Bucknell University. Otherwise, prospective employers may assume, perhaps wrongly, that you are avoiding something negative.

Noting that staff reductions have eliminated a position also may be necessary, Ms. Devlin says. For example, a candidate's qualifications may have little to do with a decision to deny him or her tenure—something a search committee needs to understand.

Some letter writers tend to make ambiguous statements, such as, "This person should be well qualified to achieve tenure at your institution," says John L. Margrave, vice-president for advanced studies and professor of chemistry at Rice University. He says he wonders whether such remarks mean that the candidate is "not good enough for our university but will be good enough for you," or whether the writer was merely being careless.

Avoid sexist or racist remarks. References to a prospective faculty member's "attractive wife" are seen less frequently these days, say those who receive recommendations, but they have yet to disappear. "Condescending or sexist remarks turn me off the recommender," says the University of Pennsylvania's Ms. Rose, "and make me wonder about the candidate."

Watch for cultural differences in phrasing. While a remark such as "Mr. Jones is not bad at all" might be considered complimentary for someone accustomed to understatement, says Ms. Rose, "that's not a good thing for a student to have on his record."

Volunteer to provide further information on the phone. Because she has such a busy schedule, Ms. Cornell says she includes her phone number and offers to accept a follow-up call "as a way of saying this is a candidate I feel strongly about." She regards such an offer to her as a sign that the candidate deserves to be taken seriously. To call extra attention to a person, Mr. Skelton of Bucknell says he sometimes initiates follow-up calls himself.

Keep the letter brief. Experienced readers look at the signature first, read the last paragraph, and then decide whether the rest of the letter is worth reading, says Ms. Wagoner. If it's six to eight pages long, she says, then it is almost certain to be scanned. Admissions panels generally find that a page to a page and a half is long enough for most letters. Personnel specialists say several succinct paragraphs often do.

End on an upbeat note. To emphasize your enthusiasm, Ms. Rose suggests, use a punchy phrase: "Hire her—you won't be sorry!"